New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 22 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 8, 1948

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"Set My People Free"

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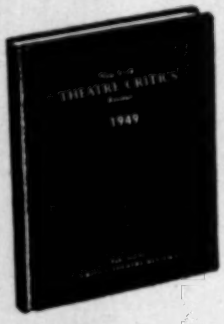

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"Set My People Free"

Daily Mirror

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

'Set My People Free' Doesn't Measure Up

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Dorothy Heyward has based "Set My People Free" upon historical material. She tells of the efforts of Denmark Vesey, an African prince, brought to Charleston, S. C., as a slave at 14, to win freedom for his fellow slaves. Proud and intelligent, Vesey educated himself and bought his own freedom.

Later, he planned an insurrection and marshalled an army of thousands. A Biblical student, he thought himself a Moses sent by God to lead his people out of slavery.

Vesey's rebellion failed, according to Mrs. Heyward's play, when another slave betrayed plans for the uprising to save the lives of his kind master's family.

"Set My People Free," in synopsis, seems exciting but in the writing and acting it becomes amazingly static. All its high purpose and good intentions get bogged down because of episodic construction. Whenever the action begins to develop pace and race the pulses, there comes a change of scene.

The drama is at its best during the scenes between Vesey and George Wilson, the head slave loyal to his master. Emotional impact and high tension are generated when George is torn between duty to his people and affection for his owner. And there comes a deeply tragic and ironic moment when George is given his freedom and is prevented by his conscience from enjoying it.

The Theatre Guild has given the Heyward script a fine production. The settings by Ralph Alswang and costumes by Ernest Schraps are stunning. Martin Ritt's direction is good, though it is unable to turn the play into completely satisfying theatre.

Canada Lee gives one of his better performances as the soulful George, and there are other excellent contributions by Juano Hernandez, Mildred Smith, Frank Wilson, Leigh Whipper and Blaine Cordner. In fact, the entire cast, a large one, is admirable.

The first-nighters in the Hudson Theatre appeared to be stirred by "Set My People Free." Their applause was robust and often spontaneous. We can only regret our inability to share their enthusiasm.

Personally, we feel that the material upon which "Set My People Free" was based is much more dramatic and gripping than the stage treatment. Despite a few absorbing moments, the new Heyward work is a disappointment. It just does not measure up to its worthy aims.

'SET MY PEOPLE FREE.'

Play by Dorothy Hayward; directed by Martin Ritt; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Ernest Schraps; production under the supervision of Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn; associate producer, Allyn Rice; choral direction and arrangements by Joshua Lee; presented by the Theater Guild at the Hudson Theater, Wednesday evening, November 3, 1948. The cast:

George, head slave	Canada Lee
Rose	Mildred Joanne Smith
Denmark	Juano Hernandez
Captain Wilson	Blaine Cordner
Phyllis	Marion Scanlon
Eliza	Gail Gladstone
Gullah Jack	Leigh Whipper
Trader Henri	Somer Alberg
Morris Brown	Frank Wilson
Patrolman	Tyler Carpenter
The Mauma	Bertha T. Powell
Pompey	Alonzo Bosan
Tina	Edith Afuka-Reid
Aneas	William Warfield
Pharaoh	William McDaniel
Benbow	Wanza L. King
Rachel	Fredye Marshall
Adam	Merritt Smith
Cuppy	Theodore Hines
Beleisle	Harry Bolden
Lot	Louis Sharp
Jemmy	George Dasher
Sinah	Musa Williams
Blanche	Urylee Leonardos
Peter Poyas	Earl Sydnor
Jesse Blackwood	Thomas Anderson
Ned Bennett	Earl Jones
Rolla Bennett	William Marshall
Monday Gell	Charles McRae
Perault Prieleau	John Houie
Minos Marth	Eric Burroughs
Blind Philip	Harold Dea Verney
Frank Ferguson	Richard Silver
First Drummer	Samuel Brown
Second Drummer	Moses Mianns

SYNOPSIS: Act I—Scene 1, breakfast room in the house of Captain Wilson, Charleston, S. C., year 1816, evening; Scene 2, a room in the slave quarters of Trader Henri, night; Scene 3, African church in Cow Alley, evening. Act II—Scene 1, a room in Denmark Vesey's house, April, 1822 (twelve years later than Act I); Scene 2, breakfast room in the house of Captain Wilson, April, 1822, night; Scene 3, a room in Denmark Vesey's house; Scene 4, Wadmalaw Island, early May night. Act III—Scene 1, breakfast room in the house of Captain Wilson, June 16, before dawn; Scene 2, a room in Denmark Vesey's house, June 16, an hour before midnight; Scene 3, George Wilson's cabin.

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

'Set My People Free' Promises An Uprising, But It Fizzles Out

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Too few of our dramatists—even those who work for the talkies—write for the eye these days. They all are so intent upon good dialogue, and the directors who stage their dramas are so intent upon a natural reading of this dialogue, that they don't think about movement. I felt last evening at the Hudson Theatre that Dorothy Heyward's "Set My People Free" was going to be a play of movement as well as talk, and was prepared to rejoice. But along about the middle of the third act it got all tired out and dropped quietly in its traces.

"Set My People Free" has been looking for a production since 1941 and the Theatre Guild gave it a good one last evening, with Juano Hernandez, Leigh Whipper and Canada Lee leading an able company. Martin Ritt, who must have a memory of Rouben Mamoulian's staging of "Porgy," has directed the work with a fine eye and ear.

A Negro Liberator.

Mrs. Heyward's play has its basis in history, one is told. It concerns a slave, Denmark Vesey, who considered himself a black Moses and who plotted the liberation of Negroes and the massacre of whites in Charleston in the early Nineteenth Century. The author writes in terms of melodrama, and her early scenes offer a promise of bold and brutal action.

One first meets some well-kept slaves in a Charleston mansion. In an African church one sees Denmark Vesey becoming inspired to the mission of liberating all slaves. One skips a dozen years, during which Denmark has been organizing and plotting. One attends jungle conjur rites.

Steadily the drama moves toward a big blowoff, but the blowoff never comes. The slaves should have massacred all the whites in Charleston, for the sake of proper dramatic fulfillment; but Mrs. Heyward could not allow this to happen because it would not be historically accurate. Instead, the whites get a tipoff about the plot and stop it before anything happens—and by so doing they stop the play, too.

'Twixt Two Loyalties.

Mr. Hernandez, a huge and crafty-looking fellow, is splendid as Denmark Vesey. Mr. Whipper is picturesque and cunning as a conjur doctor, Blaine Cordner is commendable as a southern gentleman slave-owner, and Frank Wilson gives another of his good performances in the role of a preacher.

Mr. Lee is Mr. Cordner's head slave—a man who has a decent and understandable loyalty to his master. Against his will he is drawn into the scheme for the uprising, and against his conscience he gives warning of this scheme. He is torn asunder by two opposing loyalties, and he should therefore be an interesting dramatic figure. I felt last evening that Mr. Lee was playing the part too hard and really hamming it in a last-act soliloquy.

If the real Denmark Vesey, back in 1822, had actually pulled off his uprising and slit a few white throats, Mrs. Heyward could have written the melodrama she must have wanted to write. Truth is duller than fiction.

"Set My People Free"—*continued*

New York Herald Tribune

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Old Southern Problem

AN abortive uprising of Charleston slaves in 1822 is the subject of an angular and somewhat stilted historical drama in "Set My People Free," at the Hudson. The first Theater Guild production of the season is better served in its acting than its writing. With Juano Hernandez making a commanding figure of Denmark Vesey, who bought his freedom and became a self-appointed Moses for his people, the offering has scenes of vivid theatrical excitement and impassioned eloquence. They are blurred in Dorothy Heyward's script by a studied exposition which frequently leaves the players floundering. Canada Lee, Mildred Joanne Smith, Frank Wilson and Leigh Whipper are by turns excellent and awkward as the play veers through ten scenes of attempted insurrection and African ritual.

* * *

The most effective interludes in the work are not those which deal with an ill-fated rebellion of South Carolina Negroes against their masters. Miss Heyward is at her best when she is relating the betrayal of the deliverer Denmark by a head slave who is not certain whether he does or does not want freedom. Hernandez and Lee carry out this parable with considerable effect and they pull the production into a tight and provocative climax as Denmark confronts his Judas. Had "Set My People Free" concentrated more urgently on this basic theme it would have been far more rewarding. As it is, there are stretches of static action and dull dialogue which confuse the issue. And Martin Ritt's staging does little to minimize these lapses in construction.

* * *

It is possible that the author, who wrote the piece some years ago, became too intrigued by her source material. She has opened the work in 1810, when Vesey first dreamed of setting his fellow slaves free and has then concentrated on the melodramatic events which led to the crushing of the uprising in the summer of 1822. She has opposed the recalcitrant Negroes, who formed a secret army, by good and bad white masters, none of whom are even vaguely convincing. The result is a mixture of sardonic commentary on the institution of slavery and tom-tom intensity as the projected rebellion approaches its zero hour. Violence is properly restrained in the ending, but the entire show has a way of going out of focus before that point.

* * *

Hernandez is exceptionally good as the revolutionary leader who teaches himself with the Bible and believes in the worth of his venture even if it ends in disaster. Lee is less successful in making a clearly defined character of the top slave in a kind master's household who does not know where his loyalties lie. Wilson and Whipper are fine as Denmark's chief lieutenants and Miss Smith is attractive and sympathetic as Hernandez's former love who marries the head man in a plantation entourage of slaves. On the other hand, Blaine Cordner is ill at ease as the Southern aristocrat who discovers about the rebellion. The settings by Ralph Alswang are adequate. "Set My People Free" rings clear at times, but it is too often muffled.

The New York Times

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Dipping back into Negro lore of more than a century ago, Dorothy Heyward has come up with an interesting revolutionary drama, "Set My People Free," put on by the Theatre Guild at the Hudson last evening. Mrs. Heyward is telling the story of Denmark Vesey, who almost led his people up to a rebellion in Charleston in 1826. According to a note in the program: "The plan of the procedure given in the play is the actual strategem of the Vesey insurrection."

Perhaps this note is intended to quiet the nerves of theatregoers who may think they are seeing the handbook of political revolution by a minority group. For the secret meetings, the pledge to obey the leader's commands, the training of conspirators and the ruthless renunciation of humane considerations—all have a familiar ring now.

* * *

But there is no reason to believe that Mrs. Heyward means any more than she says in her chronicle of a conspiracy that failed. Her leading character, Denmark Vesey, is not a political revolutionary but a religious fanatic who likens himself to Moses and draws his authority from the Bible. Her story moves around the pivot of a head slave who has a problem of conscience. George Wilson is attracted to the idea of a slave insurrection, but he cannot betray the master whom he loves. The fate of the uprising hangs on George's personal scruples.

There is almost a formula for Negro plays. It derives from "Porgy," of which Mrs. Heyward was co-author, and it includes spirituals, superstitions, incantations and lithographic crowd scenes. "Set My People Free" does not wholly escape the formula on the one hand, and is rather plot-bound on the other.

* * *

But to this theatregoer it is always interesting and occasionally engrossing—due no doubt to the force and magnetism of the acting. Both Juano Hernandez and Canada Lee learned their footwork in the prize ring. Not every actor is rugged enough to learn his craft the hard way. But the prize ring must be a wonderful dramatic academy. For Mr. Hernandez and Mr. Lee are remarkably stimulating actors.

As Denmark Vesey, Mr. Hernandez plays with intelligence as well as power. He can get to the point of a scene directly without self-consciousness; and he is rangy enough to make the big scenes credible. Mr. Lee's role as the troubled head slave is more complex, since it involves a division of loyalties and motives. Although this is not the biggest part Mr. Lee has had, it is one of the most difficult, and he is the actor who can make it intelligible and moving. The whole character rings with honesty.

* * *

Under Martin Ritt's competent direction, the drama is generally well acted. Mildred Smith as an attractive-mannered house slave, Frank Wilson as a preacher, Leigh Whipper as a conjure man and Blaine Cordner as a benevolent slave-holder—give able performances. To tell the story Mrs. Heyward has carried her drama through six scenes which have to be shifted rapidly. Ralph Alswang has solved the technical problems, and designed agreeable settings, also.

"Set My People Free" is not one of the Theatre Guild's wonder works. But it has a theme worth conjuring with, and it supplies the materials for some of the most exhilarating acting of the season.

Journal American

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

To Avoid Confusion, Call It Melodrama

By ROBERT GARLAND

Everybody connected with "Set My People Free." The Theatre Guild's opening entry in its thirtieth New York season, seems generally uncertain about what manner of play Dorothy Heyward has written. The playwright, you know, is the First Literary Lady of Charleston, S. C.

Produced at the Hudson in association with Allyn Rice, this is the not unworthy work the outskirts saw as "Charleston, 1822." Now, in keeping with the general uncertainty, the title has been changed to "Set My People Free." "Set My People Free" was its title in the first place.

Dealing with uncertainty, it is logical to remind you that the Theatre Guild has kept the piece waiting in the waiting-room for six or seven years. It is the co-producing Miss Rice who finally persuaded, by means of a good "personal investment," the Guilders to go ahead and stage it.

Gone ahead and staged it they have, with settings by Ralph Alswang, costumes by Ernest Schraps, chorals by Joshua Lee, and, under Martin Ritt's direction, featured performances by Juano Hernandez, Canada Lee, Mildred Smith, Blaine Cordnor, Frank Wilson and Leigh Whipper. Even so—

Well, they all do seem generally uncertain about what manner of play Dorothy Heyward has written.

Built on the fairly well-known Denmark Vesey who, in Charleston, 1822, fomented an uprising of Negro slaves, "Set My People Free" could have been a period piece, a propaganda play or a melodrama. Last night, always uncertainly, it was, from time to time, all three of them in one.

Beginning in the breakfast-room of the mansion of Ole Massa Cap'n Wilson, it was a period play in which overlord and servant got on beautifully together. Later, in Denmark Vesey's personal hideaway, it was a propaganda play in which Ole Devil Inequality went about his devilishly dirty business.

Still later, it was a melodrama. In the commodious Uncle Tom's cabin occupied by George Wilson, his lovely wife and innocent offspring, devoted slaves of a devoted

owner, terror stalked, gun in hand, while an off-stage thunder-storm raged as accompanying shutters banged contrapuntally.

By now, believe me, the Theatre Guild's well trained first-nighters are almost as confused as the people connected with the play. So they forget about the period, ignore the propaganda and accept "Set My People Free" as the melodrama it, at long last, turns out almost certainly to be . . .

It may be better so. Broadway can use a melodrama. But it should be melodramatic through and through.

* * *

When I write that everybody connected with "Set My People Free" seems generally uncertain about what manner of play Dorothy Heyward has written, the actors are included. Among the less confused performers are Juano Hernandez as Denmark Vesey and Canada Lee as George, the super-slave.

But, along with Mildred Smith as George's Mulatto Rose, Blaine Cordner as Captain Wilson, Frank Wilson as the two-faced Bishop Brown and Leigh Whipper as a Conjur Man out of Eugene O'Neill by way of Katherine Dunham's wicker birdcage, the overall uncertainty finally takes its toll of them.

And Mr. Ritt's direction is nothing a non-Theatre Guilder would write down as helpful. It, too, is generally uncertain, catching its uncertainty from the uncertainty of the Dorothy Heyward play. Period, plus propaganda, plus melodrama do not add up to solid Theatre Guilded entertainment.

Take my kind advice and accept "Set My People Free" as melodrama. Simply that and little more! Then, if you are in no great hurry, you may enjoy yourself and The Theatre Guild's first 1948-1949 offering more than I enjoyed myself and it last evening in the overheated Hudson . . .

There and then, I, too, was a sufferer from the general uncertainly as to what manner of a play Charleston's First Literary Lady had written.

New York World-Telegram

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

'Set My People Free' A Historical Drama

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There are many sequences in "Set My People Free" which seem more akin to an historical pageant than a drama. It deals with men of stature under great stress, and approaches heroic dimensions. Yet its moments of deep excitement are rare and it is curiously without personality.

Dorothy Heyward has based the play on a little known slave uprising in Charleston, S. C., in the early 19th century. A man, reputed to have been a prince in Africa, works many years to achieve his freedom, then dedicates himself to liberating all his people.

With great precaution he sets up a network of the slaves and prepares an uprising when they will meet with the least resistance from their white owners. He is betrayed to his death by another slave whose good treatment by his master confuses his loyalties to a point where he is incapable of fanatic rebellion.

A Long Struggle.

The rebel Denmark has a long struggle to win George Wilson to his cause, and he agrees only after the date of the uprising is changed so he can be sure his own master's family will be away from the city and out of harm's way. When at the last minute the family's departure is delayed by a child's sickness George breaks down and reveals the plot.

He is lauded by the whites who in effect give him his freedom, removing all his customary ties to life, and he is disdained by his own people as a traitor.

This is told with a dry dignity that seems often too scholarly and usually too talky for dramatic effect. The dialogue is ordinary at best, and the immediate conflicts are argued back and forth until tension is sacrificed.

Despite the stature of the leading characters and the momentous potentiality of what they are trying to do, it is hard to become as partisan to their cause as one would like, because they lack individuality. The playwright has delineated a wealth of moral character in her people, but has neglected to give them the external distinction that would prevent their remaining figureheads.

Fault Not Remedied.

The direction of the play has not remedied this fault, as scene after scene is played with complete physical stillness and an utter absence of business or manner that might bring these people personal color.

Despite this fault, which gives the play an awesome formality, there are some good performances of the leading roles. The casting of the two principals is particularly interesting.

Juano Hernandez seems transported by the fire of his dedication to the liberation, and acts with a spontaneous conviction that is entirely persuasive.

In contrast, the more deliberate style of Canada Lee as the confused George emphasizes the perception of logic and obligation with which civilizing kindness has weakened his will.

The sets which Ralph Alswang signed effectively suggest the time and place with an economy of detail that is striking.

Mildred Joanne Smith is as always capable and appealing as the slave girl both the men love, and does much to strengthen the final scene.

The Sun

NOVEMBER 4, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

A Crude but Effective Play.

Dorothy Heyward's "Set My People Free" is a diffuse and episodic play but one of considerable power and eloquence, and I submit it to you as a drama worth seeing.

****

****

The first performance was given last night at the Hudson, starting the Theater Guild on its thirtieth season.

"Set My People Free" is not in the same world with "Porgy" as a piece of writing and it is frequently more oratorical than dramatic. It is well staged, however, and it is frequently theatrically effective, and once you come under the spell of the acting of Juano Hernandez as the fervent deliverer, willing to give his life for a cause, he will hold your interest throughout.

Mrs. Heyward is writing of insurrection and revolt in Charleston, S. C., in the early nineteenth century, and her play is based upon historical fact. She tells her story of the efforts of Denmark Vesey, a slave who obtained his freedom on money won in a lottery, to bring about liberation by violence and bloodshed of all the slaves in the city of Charleston on an evening in 1822.

Denmark worked and plotted for twelve long years. He organized his leaders and carefully laid his plans. But his uprising meets defeat because his plot is disclosed by a head slave who wants to stand with his people but is unable to set aside a fierce loyalty to his white master.

Much of "Set My People Free" is scattered and straggling; quite a lot of it provides stirring theater. Such as the scene in Denmark's house when he is trying to bring George, the head slave and a greatly respected Negro, into the fold, and the scene in the same house when Denmark and his followers come to realize that their uprising is futile and that their cause is doomed. There is also the interlude in the spooky blackness of the harbor island when the irresolute George throws his lot with the plotters on condition that the life of his master be spared.

Martin Ritt has produced some vivid ensemble effects in his staging, and he has sought to keep the drama moving. There are excellent settings from Ralph Alswang and costumes from Ernest Schraps.

"Set My People Free" is well acted throughout. Juano Hernandez gives a fascinating performance as the demagogic insurrectionist with a passionate and fanatical yearning to liberate the slaves. There is a performance of extraordinary skill from Canada Lee as the wavering head slave, a conscience-stricken man of divided loyalties, agonized by his own indecision. Mildred Joanne Smith is first rate as George's wife. Leigh Whipper is given to amusing chantings and quackings as the conjure doctor. Blaine Cordner is entirely believable as the slave owner.

Dorothy Heyward's play, packed with violence and vengeance, is a crude drama, but it has been effectively produced and it offers a good measure of theatrical excitement.